

My way in 咏春拳 Wing Tsun Quan

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“Thunder and wind – persistence;

Thus the virtuous man stands firm changes not directions.”

32th hexagram of Yi ching.

My journey in Chinese martial arts, began more than 12 years ago. It began not with a particular interest in self defense nor the combat sports. Instead it happened by an acquaintance with classical Chinese Philosophy.

During my master degree in philosophy, my supervisor and philosopher of science prof. Sergei Gerdzhikov was also conducting a personal study in the influence of Laozi and Zhuangzi for the later development of Chan Buddhism.¹ I had read the Daoist classics earlier, but it was at that time that my interest grew. The simultaneous emphasis on practical thinking, along with what seemed like a diametrically opposed ideas such as the paradoxical notions of the koans, the highly abstract concepts of the dao, and the hexagrams of I ching presented me with a peculiar puzzle. How were such ideas compatible? What was the historical climate in which they were born and became the center of a culture whose country has withstood what made other empires to fall. Interestingly, it turned out that it was not the works of philosophers, but Chinese Gongfu that presented me with the most valuable key to understand these ideas.

At the end of my master degree, I was casually experimenting with mediation a practice which slowly turned to a daily routine which I keep today, more than 15 years later. At that time, having no idea how to do it, nor a desire to navigate in what still looks to me like a jungle of religious charlatans and cults, I experimented on my own. It became clear fairly fast, that a specific posture, relaxation and focus, were needed to have any kind of progress in what today is fashionably called “mindful” concentration. Such mindful concentration, I believed, was the source of the philosophical ideas of the classical Chinese thinkers.

There were of course only two traditional options to understand the physical side of meditation practice – the yoga exercises of the Indians and the Chinese gong fu and chi gong. Both the yogas, and the pure forms chi gong seemed rather esoteric to me.

I thought, that what really can present me with a practical idea of progress was gong fu. Since its external expression was the ability to fight effectively, the movements, posture, breathing and the whole expression of the body can be judged pragmatically and thus clearly, I argued to myself. Moreover, the traditional martial arts, where holistic disciplines, their approach to knowledge was opposed to the specialized methods which prevail today. By holistic, of course I mean that the vocabulary of Gong Fu, was often unified along with the philosophical principles of Classical Chinese philosophy, and as such these principles served to guide to forms of life - social conduct, ethics, aesthetic and the general proto-

1 Years later I found the same problem to be of particular interest especially for the occurrence of the practice of sitting meditation or 坐禪 (zuo chan) in Chan Buddhism. Two valuable albeit rather dated sources are:
McRae, John R. 1947. *The Northern School and the formation of early Chan Buddhism*. Honolulu : University of Hawaii Press.
Knaul L. 1986. Chuang-Tzu and the Chinese Ancestry of Ch'an Buddhism. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, Vol.13. p.411-428

scientific understanding of nature. Therefore, my reasoning was, that good Gong Fu will present me with a straightforward doorway to these ideas. A doorway that is not blurred by vain philosophical abstractions, since these came secondary to practice. What didn't bother me was the fact that obviously such contemporary Gong Fu would be different from its predecessors. So far as its essence of principles was present, it had practical value and did not diverge too much from its cultural roots it would suffice. After all cultures and traditions are a life form, they evolve. Thus I was settled to find a good Gong Fu school. Of course to all this the knowledge of how to defend myself, was an additional bonus.

I sought online and found one Tai Chi school and the school of Master Bagalev in Plovdiv (my hometown in Bulgaria). The Chen style Tai Chi was a disappointment, as the teacher wasn't particularly welcoming and the atmosphere in the school was rather high brow. Lucky the school of Master Bagalev was the opposite.

My first lesson was conducted in a rather traditional matter. I was invited as a spectator to the practice and after that I asked Master Bagalev to demonstrate to me, what little I knew of Wing Thung i.e. the famous one inch punch. He smiled and asked me to hold two thick pads for kicks, and promptly knocked out the air out of me through them without any distance. This of course sold me immediately – the school was, I thought, indeed authentic. Little did I know, that Master Bagalev was a master with deep understanding of the details of bodily mechanics, and the principles that I was interested in. That first acquaintance happened 12 years ago, and now I consider the friendship with Master Bagalev as one of the most valuable in my life.

At first, was rather casual at the school, practicing one or two times per week. When I finished my PhD in Bulgaria with a degree in philosophy of science, I got an offer for a post doctoral fellowship from Tsinghua university in Beijing. At that time I had about two years on and off practice in Wing Tsun.

Tsinghua, along with its twin neighbor Peking University, are universally considered as constant rivals for the title of “The best university in China”. Once in Beijing, I found that the campus had numerous student clubs including these that practice, San Da, Karate, Taekwondo and various forms of Wu Shu. There to my pleasant surprise I found out that what little I knew from my at that time fickle training, was in fact very valuable and effective. One encounter, would serve as a good example.

There was an improvised arena which the students practicing Gong fu was organizing at one hidden corner of the campus. There they gathered every Friday night to test their skills in what was effectively a small Fight Club. Each duel always started with a double hands Chi Sau (双擒手) and usually developed into a light body punching and kicking with an emphasis on throwing the opponent off the borders of a circle down in the dust. I was a new comer, and therefore “I must have been shown a lesson”. I naively entered the arena and was placed in front of my opponent. At that time I was practicing only the Siu Nim Tao (小念頭) form and was acquainted only with basic waist connection and rudimentary Chi Sau. To my surprise my opponent pushed in a rather haphazard manner and I quickly deflected him to one side. Because his force was too strong he lost balance and simply flew out of the arena. I think his surprise was as big as mine. The round was over and I won.

There was another duel after us. I stood to watch. Next to me another Chinese student, told me quietly: “Did you know that he's grandfather was the lineage holder of ... style” he said the name of the style of Gong fu in Chinese, which I regrettably did not understand at that time, as my Chinese then was practically non existing. “Now he is mad at you.” he added “You should be careful. He's going to challenge you again.” Now, I began to worry. I noticed that my opponent was all red and obviously furious. I thought: “OK this is bad. I actually do not care so much. So I shouldn't let him lose face.” (which I knew was bad in Chinese Culture, and to add in a university where all the students were so

competitive). “I will let him win” I continued in my head: “So we end up as draw, but I must be careful so I don’t let him hurt me, as obviously he is furious.”

Of course he invited me again for a rematch. This time I didn’t respond to his haphazard pressure and simply held my ground. He attempted a low take-down on my front leg, but didn’t enter deep enough so I managed to grab his neck in choke hold. He was unsuccessful, and I let him off. We returned at the starting position and I simply pushed him at the end of the arena where I pretended to lose balance to a leg sweep. I step off the arena but did not fall and the round was over. We were finished as draw and I refused a third round.

After that encounter, (and several similar), I was sure that I wasn’t wrong in my judgment – EWTO and Master Bagalev were promoting authentic functional Gong fu.

When I returned to Bulgaria for the vacation and every vacation after in my already a decade 10th in China, I use the time to practice with Master Bagalev and his talented students. There was no mistake, as the years slowly passed and I persisted in my slow progress, I discovered what I was truly interested in. Master Bagalev, was never secretive to explain, demonstrate and teach clearly the deeper principles of Wing Tsun. After 12 years of slow practice, I felt my body change and my understanding of bodily mechanics, the center concepts of mental focus, relaxation that nevertheless permits the body to remain supple, reactive and to respond with precision, deepened. These proved, as my younger self thought, to be when taken in abstraction as universal ways of conduct. To give a short illustration. To this days I find the concepts of Chi sau as the best practical illustration of Zhuangzi’s story about the Butcher:

“A good cook changes his blade once a year: he slices. An ordinary cook changes his blade once a month: he hacks. I have been using this same blade for nineteen years, cutting up thousands of oxen, and yet it is still as sharp as the day it came off the whetstone. For the joints have spaces within them, and the very edge of the blade has no thickness at all. When what has no thickness enters into an empty space, it is vast and open, with more than enough room for the play of the blade. That is why my knife is still as sharp as if it had just come off the whetstone, even after nineteen years.”²

In essence this means that as ones progress deepens, the understanding of the joint and bone structure of both oneself and the opponent also deepens. As such the musculature coordination and condition become more and more precise and one finds the joints and their spaces. The space in oneself’s joints is the space to move. As one become skillful one’s movement remains free and precise even under pressure. Thus one’s knife metaphorically does not dull from just “hacking” at the opponent in a haphazard way. With this as well one begins to “see” the the space of the opponent’s joints, who if unskillful will block itself under the correct angles and pressure and thus presents a gap for an attack. Consequently this presents “more than enough room for the play of the blade.” Similarly the passage continues:

“Nonetheless, whenever I come to a clustered tangle, realizing that it is difficult to do anything about it, I instead restrain myself as if terrified, until my seeing comes to a complete halt. My activity slows, and the blade moves ever so slightly. Then whoosh! All at once I find the ox already dismembered at my feet like clumps of soil scattered on the ground. I retract the blade and stand there gazing at it all around me, both disoriented and satisfied by it all. Then I wipe off the blade and put it away.”³

2 Ziporyn B. 2020. *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings*. Indianapolis and Cambridge.

3 *ibid.*

Of course as ones opponent are skillful greater concentration is needed. A cluster a tangle occurs, and to the outsiders both opponents move ever so slightly, the vectors of forces are matched. There is no spectacular technique at that point. Only concentration "one seeing comes to a complete halt" in a sense that one ceases to see the opponent, but instead seeing feeling and focus become one. Alas this state of concentration is hard to describe in any way to the uninitiated. The hands move ever so slightly and whomever has a greater skill and greater concentration "whoosh!" his blade - the arm prevails to find a gap, a place to slide but it is not the hit the essence, it is the fact that the whole body of the opponent becomes off balance, as if coming into disentangled parts. One, as such prevails not through straight alone but through concentration and union with a skillful cultivated action. After such an encounter one is often as astonished as the titular butcher of Zhuangzi, hardly realizing at first how in fact his body has reacted.

But even with these I feel that I have seen only the surface of Gong fu, as with each new realization a horizon of possibilities opens. And the way seem endless.